

Educational Leadership Programs and School Safety

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Abstract

Higher education educational leadership preparatory programs must embed content and standards regarding school safety issues in order to effectively prepare aspiring leaders. Advocacy, communication and specific plans regarding the development and implementation of school safety protocols, through partnerships and on-going dialogues with stakeholders provides skills that every school administrator needs to know.

Keywords: Educational leadership, school safety, higher education school leaders; preparatory programs

Introduction

University and colleges that offer educational administration and leadership preparatory programs must be prepared to adjust programs to meet the needs of safety, inclusive of mental health, in a proactive, active and reactive manner so that aspiring school leaders are prepared for the changing workplace needs. Every state's Department of Education (DOE) has state exams that aspiring educational leaders must pass in order to gain entry into the workplace as a certified school administrator. While states have varying requirements for administrative preparatory programs, they each must meet state requirements.

Embedding content of school safety parameters into courses of study at the university level and included items on state exams must be a requirement for all university programs. Most programs are based on national standards of leadership, (Professional Standards 2015). These standards were developed by collaborative efforts of policy makers, university faculty and practitioners. While states then determine their own standards, using the national standards as a base is common practice.

The national standards that relate to the issues surrounding school safety are:

Standard 3: Equity and Cultural Responsiveness
Standard 5: Community of care and support for students
Standard 7: Professional community for teachers and staff
Standard 8: Meaningful engagement of families and community
Standard 10: School Improvement
(Professional Standards, 2015)

In each of these standards, there are indicators that link directly to the overarching school safety issues.

Collaboration for School Safety

School safety is a concern of educators, parents, communities and students. When a school shooting occurs, there is an outpouring of reactions and support. Sustainability, however, seems to fade within three months of each event (Troth & Kahn, 2018).

There were 288 school shootings in the U.S. since 2009, where at least one person other than the shooter was shot (Grabow & Rose, 2018). Between August 2018-May 2019, an additional 33 mass shootings have taken place across the globe (Cox and Rich, March 2018). Partnerships between school district personnel, law enforcement and mental health providers has never been more critical. Collaboration with all stakeholders provide comprehensive strategies that can be applied to all schools and districts. The editor for *School Administrator* refer to a “new normal” where school and district administrators must now be knowledgeable in instruction and security (Goldman, J. 2019).

The issue of school safety and school shootings is a primary concern of educators, parents and members of society. Implementation of techniques, strategies and plans will assist school district personnel, families and students in being prepared. Most importantly, dealing with mental health issues of students in a caring and proactive manner, so that situations are resolved before a student brings a gun to school, is a critical component of an effective plan. Monies would be well-spent on taking care of student’s needs, which requires a cadre of assessment, intervention and support for students.

Weist and Lee (2019) discussed the success of schools where a trauma informed care model has been implemented. Through several studies, researchers have found that students who have suffered traumatic events are more likely to be treated as simply discipline issues instead of school professionals recognizing signs and symptoms of PTSD (Weist and Lee, 2016). Kinsella and Wood (2019) urged school officials to expand mental health services, violence prevention programs and conflict resolution training through the expansion of partnerships with community agencies.

We need all politicians and government officials to pay attention to the needs of students, personnel and school districts when allocating funds for education. Students need to learn, teachers need to teach and all need to be in a safe environment. (Losinski, Katsiuannis, Ryan and Baughan, 2014).

School shootings where a number of students were killed include: Columbine high school, Colorado, 1999; Virginia Tech university, Virginia, 2007; Sandy Hook elementary, Connecticut, 2012. Marjorie Stoneman Douglas high school, Florida, 2018. These were just a sample of the most noted school shootings in media and political action.

A bill was presented in the U.S. Senate in March, 2018. The STOP School Violence Act of 2018 was supported by many national associations of school leaders and mental health organizations (Tucker, 2018). The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), National Association of School Social Workers(NASSW), American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) are just a few of the supporters of this bill.

As a result of the Parkland shooting, the U.S. Department of Education created a Federal School Safety Commission. They created recommendations, but did not address issues of gun control or restrictions. The commission supported arming teachers, even though educators and police authorities were strongly against the recommendations. They recommended an increase of mental health support, but no additional funding for those services. They suggested schools, districts and states to complete risk assessments of facilities, with support of some additional funding from the federal government. Most of the commission’s recommendations put responsibility to the states, districts and schools but provided no additional federal dollars of support (Klein, A. February 2019).

The results of both of these actions were developed frameworks for increased mental health services and school safety collaborative plans. All organizations, police authorities, bureaucrats and politicians supported the concepts. However, there was minimal monies associated with increased requirements or considerations.

For example, Florida passed legislation that required districts to provide armed security at every school and opened the door for districts to allow teachers to be armed. While many districts have chosen to not arm teachers, all have been required to provide armed security (State of Florida, 2018)

This legislation also requires additional mental health training for school officials and required the development of the Office of Safe Schools for the state of Florida. While the statute requires that allocations be made from general education appropriations, most districts reported that the amount provided was less than what was required to bring each school into compliance. For example, Hillsborough County Schools, Florida, received an additional \$6 million of security funding, but the cost to come into compliance was \$7 million (Hillsborough County Schools website, 2018).

Similar things are occurring throughout the country in other states. States that supported similar work include Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, New York, New Jersey Illinois, Indiana, Georgia, Maine, Kentucky, Michigan, New Mexico, Wisconsin. There are additional states, as this is not a complete list. The point is that all states supported school safety initiatives, increased mental health services, but few found additional funds to support these initiatives, as minimal new Federal monies were assigned. Similar to the example in Hillsborough County, Florida, school leaders were expected to reallocate resources, which meant other services and programs received less funds than previously.

Schools are micro societies, reflecting the tone of what is occurring at the local, state and national levels. Public focus on events such as immigration, border walls, neo-Nazi's and white supremacists, and gender identification all impact how students in schools respond to one other in a positive or negative manner. Professional Standard 2a calls for effective leaders to act according to and promote the professional norms of integrity, fairness, transparency, trust, collaboration, perseverance, learning and continuous improvement." (p. 10) Standard 3e also supports that work: "effective leaders confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status" (p.11) (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Current educational leaders and aspiring leaders must be diligent with their focus and commitment to respect and the celebration of diversity.

The Framework for Safe and Successful Schools (2013) specifically identified what school principals and district leaders must know. These included: ability to use financial resources to best meet the needs of individual schools' students and community; engage collaborative partnerships with support; hire additional mental health school counselors; provide incentives for increased partnerships with community and school stakeholders; integration of community and school services to students and families; improve access to mental health support and services; and increased, sustainable professional development training for students and adults in school settings regarding issues of concern, reporting potential harmful behavior and actions, and integrated school safety plans that are viable plans, not required shelf art (Cowan, K.C., Vaillancourt, K., Rossen, E., & Politt, K, 2013).

What school leaders must know

School leaders must be able to coordinate efforts on behalf of their stakeholders, both in the school building, school district, and community. Issues that school leaders need to be prepared to deal with include bullying, acts of intolerance against others with varying beliefs on issues such as gender, race, ethnicity, disability, religion, sexual preferences and the impact on safety for all.

School leaders must be proactive in planning and supporting all stakeholders in being safe, so that learning can occur. Collaborating with police authorities, having plans for various types of school events, and communicating those plans effectively to all stakeholders, can result in outcomes that are more positive should a traumatic event occur.

School leaders must be prepared and be able to educate others through a balanced approach to school safety. Developing school-community partnerships to enhance school safety measures and provide preparedness training, review communication systems within the school district and with community members, implement violence prevention programs are tasks that leaders must facilitate.

Developing an interdisciplinary approach that includes administration, faculty, parents, students, and community partners requires a new collaborative approach with educators, administrators, social workers, health and mental health professionals, criminal justice officials, religious leaders, and our business community. Many districts and schools are moving from zero-tolerance to restorative practices. This requires heavier support from mental health professionals and a shift in thinking on the part of educators. The Denver school based restorative practices partnership (2017) has produced a step-by-step guide to provide assistance to educators with the implementation of restorative practices.

Identification of policies, practices and plans

School leaders must know what school board policies exist, what they need to do with said policies so that implantation of those policies is in place with all stakeholders and that accountability measure for dissemination and evaluation is ongoing in practice. While certainly administrators should be sure their schools / districts are in compliance with state guidelines, the National School Board Association (2018) recommends 4 phases of crisis management including: prevention and mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. The association's Fostering Safer Schools guide provides helpful direction for superintendents and school board officials and addresses topics ranging from mental health services, threat assessments, safety plans and coordination with law enforcement.

Development and implementation of school safety plans

While every school district has a safety plan, often they become "shelf art" until a negative activity occurs. Plans should be developed in accordance with laws and regulations but need to be utilized by school personnel. A leader needs to develop a systemic way of ensuring that the safety plan is a practical document that fosters ongoing communication and review. Best practices call for regularly occurring drills that are performed in collaboration with local law enforcement officials.

Communication

One of the biggest challenges related to school safety is to maintain an ongoing conversation inclusive of issues of mental health, pre-, post and active concerns, challenges and plans of action, and school leaders need to understand the importance and ways to ensure communication with all stakeholders. Every plan reviewed by the authors emphasizes the need for strong coordination of efforts with agencies and community members.

University Preparatory Programs for Educational Leaders

While much of the research identifies what school leaders need to know, there is minimal research or reporting of how preparatory programs for aspiring leaders need to infuse these critical components into their programs of study. If university programs do not ensure these issues are embedded in learning outcomes, how will our leaders gain this knowledge or skill set?

All states have a praxis exam for school leaders. All state exams have national standards related to creating and maintaining safe learning environments. However, most state exams do not address issues of mental health or school safety, related to what informed leaders need to know.

It is not expected that emerging leaders know everything. However, they need to be able to ask the right questions of the correctly identified people, advocating for safety in their schools. For example, identification of at risk behaviors of a student, when to refer to a mental health counselor or crisis intervention team, how to identify a significant facility need.

Our university programs need to involve case studies, resources, materials and practice on collaboration with community agencies of mental health and police authorities, policies and interactions with district leaders and school boards, student to student safety issues (bullying, cyber bullying, etc.) and training for faculty, staff; engaging parents and community to assist.

The most important thing identified in research is a lack of continual presence of communicating about issues of school safety (Troth & Kahn, 2018). This means leaders need to have a standing agenda item of safety and mental health on every faculty and school and district meeting; PTO/PTA meetings, and every professional development opportunity.

University educator preparatory programs must include these vital aspects of safety and mental health services. Our children need our advocacy and support.

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